

## INTRO TO NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE STORIES AS THEORY

SEMESTER  
PROFESSOR: ERIN CHESLOW  
DAY AND TIME  
LOCATION  
OFFICE HOURS  
OFFICE LOCATION

Scholars and storytellers from Christopher Teuton (Cherokee Nation) to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) have posited that stories are theory. Literature – from performance to poetry to the novel – helps us to focalize not only the historical events and current issues that shape our understanding of the world but also *how* we come to that understanding. This semester, we will take this claim seriously as a methodology that allows us to approach American Studies as a field built on Indigenous land. We will read theory alongside literature to enter into conversation with epistemologies grounded in webs of relationality that are not limited to individual rights or legal frameworks but instead imagine possibilities for change that are situated in relation to land and to other people (human and nonhuman).

This course offers an introduction to Indigenous studies, an interdisciplinary field that centers the stories, experiences, cultural identities, values, and knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples. Through a series of units on restorying the land, residential schools, Native-settler land relations, language, sovereignty and resistance, we will read theory alongside poetry, novels, and one memoir from the Pacific and North America that themselves theorize and enact possible ways of being in the world. By the end of the class, you should be able to write in conversation with these traditions and, hopefully, engage with literacy as a complex and constantly evolving skill in which we are all constantly questioning how we think and why.

### COURSE REQUIREMENTS

#### TEXTS

Michelle Good, *Five Little Indians*  
Linda Hogan, *Solar Storms*  
Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, *Iep Jāltok*  
Liliu‘okalani, *Hawai ‘i’s Story by Hawai ‘i’s Queen*  
Leanne Simpson, *Noopiming*  
Tanya Tagaq, *Split Tooth*  
Haunani-Kay Trask, *Night Is a Sharkskin Drum*

**In addition to these texts**, please also purchase a Composition Notebook of your choosing. All other texts will be made available on Canvas as PDFs or web links.

## WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Annotation Notebook: For each week of reading assigned, you will be responsible for an entry in an Annotation Notebook, which you will share with me and the class when requested. In each entry, you will respond to a prompt and keep notes based on your reading. You can use the following questions to guide your notetaking:
  - a. Note down your initial reactions. How does the text make you feel? Does it affect the way you think about yourself and the world?
  - b. What are some cultural contexts you recognize? How might the reading help you better understand the period in time with which the text is associated?
  - c. How does the text enact Indigenous and/or feminist methodologies? Where do you see the author writing in ways that are unexpected? What expressions do they use to portray their subject?
  - d. What questions do you have? List at least one.
  - e. Pick one interesting passage to close read and bring it to class for discussion.

Your responses will be used for class discussion and to fuel your writing assignments. They should not take long, but they should be well thought out and relevant to the reading.

2. Artwork Presentation: See sign-up sheet for individual due date. 5-10 minutes, with notes or script and sources demonstrating preparation. For the date you signed up for, identify an Indigenous artist, innovator, thinker, or community movement whose work intersects with any of the readings we have examined (and who is not featured on our course reading schedule). Prepare a short presentation in which you choose one piece of art to research more thoroughly, providing background on the creator, their relationship to the period, and what the piece represents to you and to society more broadly. At the end of your presentation, provide a connection to our reading for that day that might help us start discussion.
3. Imitations Assignments #1-2: Based on readings for this class, you will write a 2-page response to a prompt. In the response, you will be asked to imitate the style and methods of engagement – what we will call expressions – employed in the reading. In doing so, you will develop strategies for engaging with different communities and begin to explore your own positionality in relation to the texts we read in class. I will provide prompts for each assignment based on our discussions in class.
4. Imitation Assignment #3: This assignment will ask you to do a more sustained imitation of a text of your choosing from the class, one we have not yet imitated. In 3-4 pages, analyze the cultural context of a primary text of your choosing using the expressions in the text you are imitating. For instance, if you are imitating Teaiwa's "Yaqona/Yagoqu" and analyzing Jetnil-Kijiner's *Iep Jaltok*, you might begin with a descriptive story of an important moment in our discussion of the text, or a discussion you've had outside of class, then analyze the relationship between nuclear testing and motherhood in Jetnil-Kijiner's poetry through storytelling.

This imitation is, in essence, a close reading, which we will discuss and practice in class. Keep that in mind as you plan and draft your imitation. You might, for instance, consider starting from a specific word or pattern that you notice in your primary text to develop your analysis.

5. Research Question for Final: Using the imitation and close reading skills we have developed in class, I will ask you to choose one of the critical frameworks from the course and pair it with a primary text. You will then develop a research question that you will work to answer for the rest of the semester. What would you like to explore further? How might that reading help you to better understand a larger issue? In other words, what questions have emerged over the course of this class and how might the critical frameworks and primary texts we have read help you to explore that question?
6. Final Research Paper: The final paper will incorporate the methods and skills you have practiced throughout the semester. You will develop a research question that engages with a topic that is of interest to you, then write a 5-6 page paper answering your question. You will be asked to engage with both critical frameworks and a primary text to develop your own argument in conversations with those texts.

Each of you will schedule a one-on-one meeting with me *after* you have formulated your research question for the final research paper. At that time, we will discuss your final project and other work in the class so far. We can also discuss writing in general or anything else on your mind.

LATE WORK: I will accept work within 24 hours of the day and time that each assignment is due, but you will lose 10% of your final grade on that assignment. I will not accept work more than 24 hours late unless you contact me in advance of the due date.

### GRADING

This course will not employ a traditional alpha-numeric grading system. Instead, I use a grading contract, outlined below.

Instead of a grade for individual assignments or work in class, you will receive extensive feedback from me and your peers that should help you to think through your own language use and writing and develop skills for working with different texts. I will provide you with methods and examples to help you do this work, and we will continually discuss your expectations for the course and strategies for developing and meeting those expectations.

The idea here is that, unlike in a graded classroom, most of the feedback you will receive in your life will not be graded. If you wanted to learn to crochet, no one would give you an F for making a misshapen sock. Instead, they would show you how to do better and provide their responses to your process and any mistakes you might have made. It's the same in this class. Instead of providing a stick and carrot to get you to meet what you perceive my standards might be, I will instead continually provide you with my thoughts as a reader of your work and as a fellow reader of the other texts in the class. We will treat your texts just like we do the published texts we read, responding to them as part of a larger conversation about a given subject or contending with a particular issue.

Research in education and psychology over the past 30+ years has shown that the presence of grades in classrooms discourages risk taking and creativity. In this class, you are encouraged to take risks, to make creative choices that might not pan out in the end but will ultimately help you and others in the class think about writing differently. And you *won't* be punished for it. It is my

hope that you will be creative and thoughtful in your work and bring your own interests to the table in your choices.

The following grading contract will only affect your final grade in the class. For all other assignments and readings, we will enter into conversation as a class about what the texts we write and read are doing, how we respond to them, and the choices you have made. When done properly, a shift away from grading is not a shift away from rigor. It is, in fact, quite the opposite.

#### THE GRADING CONTRACT:

**You will receive an A for the term if you fulfill all the following expectations:**

- meet due dates and criteria for all assignments and learning activities
  - as outlined in the “Late Assignments” section below, you are allowed an extension if you communicate sufficiently with me (at least 48 hours before the deadline) and submit the assignment within the mutually determined time frame
- attend all classes and participate in class discussion regularly, thoughtfully, and substantively (See “Participation” below.)
- in a focused and specific manner, engage with my and your peers’ feedback throughout the term

**You will receive a B for the term if you do any of the following:**

- turn in an assignment late without communicating proactively with me (at least 48 hours before the deadline)
- turn in an assignment that is insufficiently developed or incomplete
- fail to turn in one or more assignment
- are absent for more than three classes without medical documentation
- participate sporadically in class discussion and activities (including collaborative group discussions)
- show cursory attention to my and your peers’ feedback throughout the term

**Your final grade will be lowered to a C if you do any of the following:**

- turn in multiple assignments late without communicating proactively with me (at least 48 hours before the deadline)
- turn in multiple assignments that are insufficiently developed or incomplete
- engage insufficiently in class discussion and activities (including collaborative group discussions)
- fail to engage with my and your peers’ feedback throughout the term

**Your grade will be lowered to a D or F if you do any of the following:**

- fail to turn in the majority of assignments
- submit assignments that are insufficiently developed, late, or incomplete

- consistently fail to participate in class discussion and activities (including collaborative group discussions)
- submit any work that is not your own
- miss six classes or more without medical documentation

#### DEADLINES AND LATE WORK

In this course, deadlines are considered motivation and accountability tools. They are designed to help you pace out your responsibilities. Since your work is assessed on the basis of the contract, there will be no deduction in your grade if you submit an assignment late. However, deadlines are not only a tool for you; *they are also an agreement with me and your peers*, a way to be considerate of the time of others. I will accept late work, but you will miss out on vital feedback from me and your peers, and continually missing deadlines shows disrespect for me and your peers. While mistakes and emergencies happen, please view all the work we do in this class in terms of the responsibilities you have to others and the responsibilities they have to you. That said, I am always happy to grant extensions if you ask in advance.

#### PARTICIPATION

In each class, contribute to class discussion with any thoughts or questions you might have throughout the class. Remember, **there are no wrong answers!** While you may not have something to say every single day, I expect you to contribute to class discussion often. Say what comes to mind and build off of what your peers say. For more information, see the Etiquette and Expectations section of this syllabus.

### **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

By the end of this class, students should be able to do the following:

- Engage critically and dialogically with primary and secondary texts
- Develop knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the history, life, culture, and contributions of Indigenous peoples in the United States
- Learn to recognize and practice diverse interpretive methods for understanding how literature and arts address and express matters of cultural, social, and political significance
- Reflect on one's own cultural positionality and discuss perspectives and experiences of others

### **EXPECTATIONS**

- You are required to bring the readings, along with your Annotation Notebook and any other assigned materials, to class each day. It is important that you be able to refer back to the text and pull out key ideas directly in our discussions.
- I do allow laptops and tablets but only for schoolwork. If I feel that you are not paying adequate attention and participating fully in class discussions, I will dock participation points.

- Cellphones must be turned off during class. Use of a cellphone for *any* purpose will result in a lower participation grade.
- You are expected to be *active listeners* in this class. Show your engagement with the course material and in class discussions by looking interested, taking notes, and asking questions.

### **PLAGIARISM**

Through imitation, you can learn the forms, methods, and conventions utilized by writers and their discourse communities. The words and phrases used by the writer, however, are their own. Any copied wording or phrasing or any repeated passages that are not properly quoted and cited will be considered plagiarism, resulting in a 0 on the paper in question. Do not hesitate to speak with me if you have any questions regarding this matter. Please keep in mind:

- Any source consulted must be included on your Works Cited page, even if you have not quoted it directly.
- All paraphrased and summarized information must be distinct from the material paraphrased or summarized and must be cited correctly, including an in-text citation.
- Most of what can be found directly online will not qualify as a reputable sources. We will discuss source viability further in class.

Please consult the university policy on academic dishonesty for more information.

## COURSE OUTLINE

Note: Homework and readings are listed for *the day they are due*. Please plan accordingly.

(C) = Find on Canvas                      (A) = Artwork for Artwork Presentation

1. Week 1: How to read difficult texts
  - a. Introductions
  - b. Read Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization Is not a Metaphor” together in class
2. Week 2: How do we talk about natives?
  - a. Excerpts from Treuer, *Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians but Were Afraid to Ask*
3. Unit I (weeks 3-5): Land as Story
  - a. Excerpts from Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*
  - b. Fiegel, “The Daffodils from a Native Perspective”
  - c. Excerpts from Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*
  - d. Hogan, *Solar Storms*
4. Unit II (weeks 6-7): Residential Schools
  - a. Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native”
  - b. Good, *Five Little Indians*
5. Unit III (weeks 8-9): This Is Native Land (Treaties, Allotment, and Annexation)
  - a. Simpson, “The Treaty with Hoof Nation”
  - b. Text of the Dawes Act, the Morrill Act, the Major Crimes Act, etc.
  - c. Liliu’okalani, *Hawai ‘i’s Story by Hawai ‘i’s Queen* (excerpted)
  - d. Simpson, *Noopiming*
6. Unit IV (weeks 10-11): Language and Land
  - a. “What Is Poi?”
  - b. Armstrong, “Land-Speaking”
  - c. Jetñil-Kijiner, *Iep Jaltok* and videos of spoken word performance
7. Unit V (weeks 12-13): Sonic and Visual Sovereignty
  - a. Raheja, “Visual Sovereignty,” *Native Studies Keywords*
  - b. Reed, “Sonic Sovereignty”
  - c. Leanne Simpson, videos and music
  - d. Tagaq, *Split Tooth* and music
  - e. *In Whose Honor?* dir. Jay Rosenstein
8. Unit VI (weeks 14-15): Resistance and Indigenous Futurities
  - a. Leanne Simpson interview in *Revolutionary Feminisms*
  - b. Trask, “Notes from a Native Daughter”
  - c. Trask, *Night Is a Sharkskin Drum*

## POSSIBLE IMITATION PROMPTS

- For this assignment, you will try your hand at the kind of exercise many other writers have practiced—imitation. I will assign one of our readings from class and ask you to make that writer's expressions your expressions. You'll have to figure out what, exactly, the writer is doing in their writing. What concept/belief/issue are they expressing or exploring? How are they doing so? We will spend time in class learning to understand each writer's expressions – their style and technique – and how those expressions help them to achieve their purpose in writing. You will need to stick closely to what you think the writer is doing. For example, if the writer explores a topic by using a personal anecdote, you will also use a personal anecdote. If they criticize a political belief, you do the same.

In short, in only two pages, you will each imitate those expressions in response to a prompt we will come up with together in class.

Since this is an Indigenous Literatures class, the idea is to question our own assumptions and ways of thinking by thinking alongside knowledge systems not our own. It is not enough to simply include Indigenous literatures on a syllabus like this one; our thinking should be guided by the Indigenous knowledge that shapes that literature. What would it mean to relate to the world through, for example, Leanne Simpson's or Jeanette Armstrong's frameworks? This is an opportunity, possibly an uncomfortable one, to explore that question.

**Example prompt from class:** For this one, students chose to imitate Jeanette Armstrong's "Land-Speaking." They identified the following pattern:

- Starts with a first-person road map ("I will argue") and identifies a comparison she will make for her argument (i.e., Okanagan vs. English)
  - Provides context for discussing Okanagan language in English (ethos)
  - Provides evidence through her ancestors and their stories
  - Concludes by showing (not telling) the contrast, providing an illustration
  - Explains how she uses the two languages, provides a way for readers to do the same (the stakes)
- *Native Studies Keywords* (available as an e-text through the library) is organized into the following key concepts: Sovereignty, Land, Indigeneity, Nation, Blood, Tradition, Colonialism, and Indigenous Epistemologies/Knowledges. Select one of these concepts. Drawing from one of the essays in the collection, discuss your selected term in relation to one of the readings we have examined in the course.
  - In *As We Have Always Done*, Leanne Simpson describes the process of making a map:

During the next two years, the Elders, who in my memory are now eagles, took me under their wing. I wrote down on large topographical maps every place-name for every beach, bay, peninsula, and island they could remember—hundreds and hundreds of names. We marked down all of their traplines, and the ones before



that and the ones before that. We marked down hunting grounds and finishing sites, berry patches, ricing camps, and medicines spots. We marked down birthplaces and graves. We marked down places where stories happened. We marked down ceremonial sites, places where they lived, places where life happened. We also marked down the homes of their relatives—places where moose and bears lived, nesting spots and breeding grounds. We marked down travel routes, spring water spots, songs and prayers. Places where feet touched the earth for the first time. Places where promises were made. The place where they blocked the tracks during the summer of the so-called Oka Crisis.

We also recorded pain. The prisoner-of-war camp, the internment camp, and its school that some Nishnaabeg kids attended so they could continue to live with their families and not go to residential school. The 150 years of clear-cuts. The hydro-electric dams, the direction the lake was supposed to flow. The flood, the road, the railway tracks, the mines, the pipeline, the hydrolines. The chemical sprays, the white people parks and campgrounds. Deaths.

The overlays showed decade after decade of loss. They showed the why.

Standing at the foot of a map of loss is clarity. (14-15)

Using the “Native Land Digital” map at <https://native-land.ca>, select the location of your home or a place where you once lived and identify the Indigenous peoples connected to that place. This will be the first layer of your map.

Now, create the second layer in the way Simpson does: “mark[] down places where stories happened”—specifically, your stories. What are the stories of your home? How do they shape how you think of home? Choose maybe two or three places with stories that you are comfortable sharing in your writing.

Now, record the Indigenous stories of those places. What are those places called? Are there stories attached to them, like Simpson’s story of the squirrel tapping for maple syrup? How has the land been changed in the last 200 hundred years—clear cuts, schools, dams, rivers redirected, people relocated?

You now have a map made of three layers. Like Adik does in Simpson’s *Noopiming*, tell a story of walking the route you have created between your storied places. Walk along the route in your mind, as you once did when those stories were first created, and narrate the layers. How does this place look to you now that it has been placed in its historical and present-day context?